

WORLDVIEW

EXCURSUS 3

Mark A. Bruzonsky on ISRAEL: A SHAMEFUL SILENCE

Last April 12 four teenage Israeli Palestinians commandeered a bus. Though no one had been injured by the Palestinians, who were not armed with guns, and though negotiations were under way, Israeli forces stormed the bus, killing two of the youths and one Israeli woman and injuring many others. The two remaining Palestinians, uninjured, were taken into custody. The next day they were dead. Some reports suggested their bodies had been mutilated.

Israeli authorities went to extraordinary lengths to suppress the evidence of this occurrence. Film was confiscated, photographs were banned, and, for the first time in Israel's history, an establishment Hebrew newspaper was closed. Official lies were told, altered, changed again. Yet what had occurred was so repugnant that it made headlines and TV network news in the United States. Inside Israel the killings caused an uproar. Under increasing pressure from within Israeli society itself, the Israeli Government finally established a secret Army commission—its report undisclosed to this day—in what now seems a successful attempt to bury the incident along with the bodies.

The responsible official, Defense Minister Moshe Ahrens, sought to cast blame elsewhere. Though in charge at the scene and photographed with the two captured Palestinians, he denied issuing any orders or knowing anything about the prisoners' fate. On May 28 he issued a statement admitting that the two teenagers had been beaten to death and advising that "legal action shall be taken" against those responsible, but he suppressed the Army report with a "top secret" stamp.

Two days later the *New York Times* declared in an editorial that the way Israel had handled the matter proved that there was "equal justice in Israel." Yet the following day the *Times* refused to print a letter to the editor signed by a former assistant secretary of state for the Near East, a former Republican congressman, a former Egyptian minister who had participated at Camp David, and myself challenging the *Times's* editorial and calling upon Israel to conduct a truly impartial investigation and public trial of those responsible for the murders. Now, a few months after the startling admission that the Palestinians had indeed been beaten to death, there has been neither "equal justice" nor, in fact, any justice. And Minister Ahrens has refused to answer further questions.

But there is soul-searching in Israel. "What in the hell is happening to us?" asked Yoel Marcus, one of the country's most senior commentators, writing in its most respected daily, *Ha'aretz*. Even more ominous, Marcus pointed out, is Israel's moral degeneration to the point that this kind of racism, brutality, and criminality toward Palestinians has become commonplace:

In justification we are told that this was a "deviant act," which of course is not true. In the same week that we learned the bitter truth about the fate of the two terrorists, the Jerusalem District Court was hearing a case that seemed to come straight out of the Holocaust. It concerned the abuse of Halhoul residents by three border policemen. According to the testimony, they forced children to slap their fathers and even demonstrated the required force of the slap to the children; made residents crawl on all fours and bark like dogs; stood an 83-year-old man wearing only his underwear outside in the cold of the night and as a "grand finale" made him sing Hatikva [the Israeli national anthem] and chant "Long Live Israel!" Reading these testimonies you can scarcely believe your eyes. These are members of the Jewish people...?

Saddened and troubled by the growing incidence of murder, torture, and barbarism toward Palestinians, Yigal Arens, professor of Computer Science at the University of Southern California and son of Israel's defense minister, recently sent me a few other translations from the Hebrew press detailing similar occurrences. "This sounds depressingly like some Central American countries we're familiar with," the younger Arens concluded.

But the saddest reality of all is that the once vibrant American Jewish community has been silenced, seemingly acquiescing in such Israeli crimes, distortions, and excuses. And those who do speak up—Jew and non-Jew alike—find themselves the victim of character assassination campaigns and worse. (On this subject, former Representative Paul Findley's soon-to-be-published volume about the tactics and power of the Jewish lobby makes for intimidating reading.) In this particular case, not one single American Jewish organization protested the murder of the Palestinians or publicly stood behind the courageous Israeli press as it battled the Israeli Government. Nor has any American Jewish organization insisted that the murderers be brought to trial.

Israel has badly lost its way and is dangerously close to grafting a kind of democratic fascism onto a Middle Eastern apartheid. The recent election has made all too evident both the escalating ideological polarization and political impotence of Israel today.

American Jewry has lost its voice and is dangerously close to losing its independence from Jerusalem along with its concern for the universal, humanistic values of the Jewish heritage. And the American Government appears to have acquiesced in Israel's tragic distortion of Camp David—now a lifeless, one-sided perpetuation of conflict rather than the hoped-for pursuit of a fair and honorable peace that would promote "the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people" as well as Israeli security.

Mark A. Bruzonsky is a Washington-based consultant on Middle Eastern affairs and a former Washington Associate of the World Jewish Congress.